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Politicians Inclined to Favor Secrecy

The technology of espionage has reached such a wondrous state that the United States and the Soviet Union regularly intercept each other's most secret communications. Yet of late, both governments have intensified their security routines.

Since they cannot keep secrets from each other, who are they trying to hide their operations from? The deep-down truth is that both governments are really afraid of their own people. They are driven, therefore, to draw a curtain of secrecy between their internal operations and the people they are supposed to serve.

The millions who compose our own permanent government, in their heart of hearts, are at odds with democracy. They prefer to exercise their permeating power from the obscurity of the cubicle, shuffling government forms and issuing edicts.

They abhor conflict, which disrupts the smooth implementation of their plans and procedures. They embrace secrecy because what is not known cannot be disrupted. They scorn party politics, with the emotions and harangues and oversimplifications, as irrational.

But in a democracy, the right to make the big decisions belongs to the people. Thus controversy becomes the seedbed of decision, and secrecy frustrates the decision-making process. The differences between parties, however irrational or elusive, are the bases of decision.

Nevertheless politicians, once they come to power, are inclined to adopt the secretive ways of the bureaucrats. For the politician in office doesn't want his acts and policies to reach the people through what he considers the distorting prism of the press. What he wants known, he would prefer to communicate directly through more tightly controlled mechanisms.

In 1976, for instance, Jimmy Carter promised to install a people's presidency in Washington. The good ole boy from Georgia said he would run "an open government to let our people know what our government leaders are doing, including the president." His Cabinet meetings, he vowed, would be thrown open.

Carter held one open Cabinet meeting; then like the presidents before him, he closed the doors. I tried to help him keep his campaign promise by publishing newsworthy excerpts from the secret Cabinet minutes.

One of Carter's Cabinet members, Joseph A. Califano Jr., has now revealed how much this upset the president. In his new book, "Governing America," Califano writes:

"Jack Anderson had begun occasionally to carry excerpts from Cabinet meeting minutes in his column Carter told us to treat minutes of the Cabinet meeting 'with the care that should be given highly classified

documents.' The minutes would be distributed to Cabinet members marked 'for your eyes only,' he said. 'We've got to stop Jack Anderson putting in his column what's going on at Cabinet meetings.'

"He only whetted Anderson's appetite. I was among those from whom the aggressive columnist sought copies thereafter; I refused, but Anderson got them somewhere else."

For the past quarter century, I have published news from classified documents. I have been less willing than other correspondents to accept the government's right to classify whatever it wishes. The practice has been for government officials to classify incoming information and then selectively release only what they want the public to know. I try to intercept the intakes before they are censored.

High officials, meanwhile, not only use their classification powers to censor the news but seek added restrictions on the public's right to know. Under the banner of national security, they are now assaulting the Freedom of Information Act and clamoring for stricter security laws.

But unfortunately, no laws passed by Congress can stymie the Russians' all-seeing spy satellites and all-hearing monitoring devices. The laws would merely impede the flow of information to the American people, not to the men in the Kremlin.